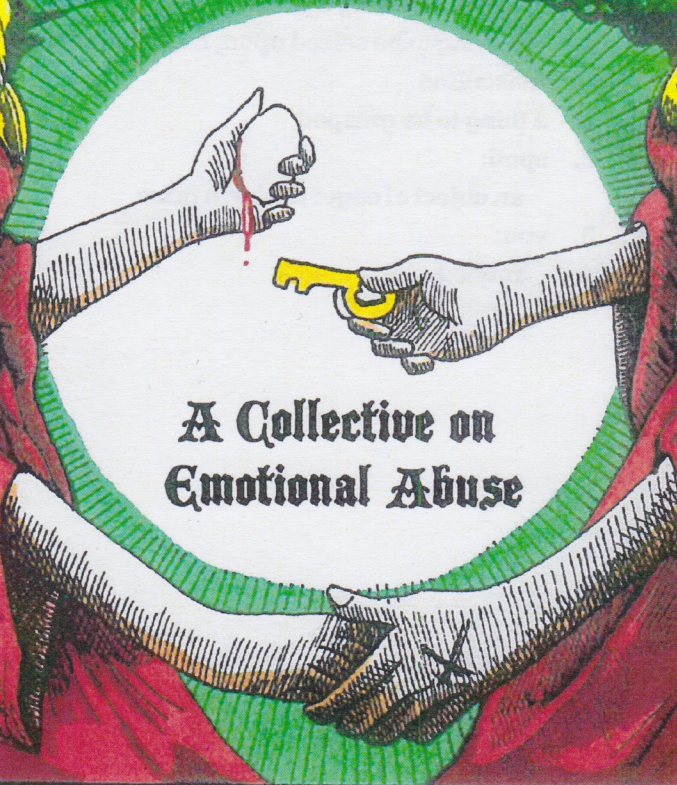


Harpagmos



A Collective on
Emotional Abuse

harpagmos (har-pag-mos')

adjective, masculine

1. to deem anything a prize:
a thing to be seized upon, held fast, retained

noun, masculine

1. a thing to be grasped
2. spoil:
an object of eager desire; a prize
3. you:
robbed

Author's Note

"Did you cry?"

"No, I didn't cry...I just kept thinking that when human beings get that way,
they're no good for anything."

—Osamu Dazai, *No Longer Human*

The Post-Impressionist painter Paul Cezanne once remarked, "Time and reflection change the sight little-by-little 'til we come to understand," and as I continue examining my past 39 years on Earth, I've found no truer statement. Were I to condense my existence into but a few vignettes, I would see a privileged, creative and analytical young woman who was also terribly insecure.

Like so many others, for much of my life I have struggled with anxiety and depression. This conflict began at a very early age with the loss of my grandmother, the emotional anchor of my father's side of the family. Even though my time with her was short, I can say there was no other period in my life during which I experienced the unbroken closeness and security of family, all due to the kindness and compassion that she embodied. While everyone must experience their first encounter with death at some point, her unexpected passing due to a brain aneurysm darkened my outlook on existence much sooner than any child deserves.

Further complicating my youth was my parents' contentious divorce, an experience that continued to erode my already tenuous sense of security within the world. And as if on cue, this waning security was all but destroyed when one of my first sexual experiences was born of traumatizing sexual coercion committed by a peer.

All things considered, it's safe to say that my young adult years were filled with fear, confusion and uncertainty.

This emotionally unstable foundation forced me to constantly doubt my own liberty and instead live to meet the unexamined expectations of others. I blindly navigated my early adult years based on the approval of influential people in my life, so I followed the generic prescription into adulthood: by 22, I finished college with a degree in science; by 28, I was a married homeowner; by 33, however, I realized that I was unfulfilled by the status quo imposed upon me. Therefore, I did something formerly unthinkable: I chose to leave a comfortable and safe life with my partner of seventeen years to set out on a long-overdue journey of self-discovery.

While I enjoyed living alone and dating freely, I didn't allow my newly-found autonomy to last long before I felt pressured to again meet social norms in the form of a productive domestic relationship. Further, I chose to ignore red flags in potential partners out of naïveté and hope; however, it was this ignorant denial in tandem with the pressure I felt to meet both social and sexual norms that led me straight into two back-to-back abusive relationships. While I managed to both navigate and escape those situations without creating dependents or suffering severe financial exploitation, that does not mean that I escaped entirely unscathed.

After my divorce, the first partner onto whom I latched was a failed musician unable to maintain steady work in *any* field, let alone music. As he attempted to realize his broken dreams of a career in music, I felt that as the "people pleasing partner," it was my duty to keep supporting him both financially *and* emotionally.

As is often the story, our relationship wasn't *always* a codependent cycle, though it quickly devolved into one. After all, when we first met, we had amazing sexual chemistry and he led me to believe that I was the most important person in his life; that not only would we make a fantastic artistic team together, but with his help (of course), I would achieve the confidence that I always wanted.

Unsurprisingly, things between us didn't go according to plan. I was terribly naïve, stupidly hopeful and ill-prepared to deal with his ceaseless denigration. By the time I extracted myself from this toxic relationship, I was left only with indirect blame: I was the primary source of misery for him because I excelled in my work and was taking the opportunity to build my own life, and it was this self-realized autonomy that threatened his fragile core.

Throughout the exasperating and maddening process of ending the relationship, he bestowed upon me several new titles: I was a *nag* because I was too entwined in his drinking habits; I was a *basic bitch* because he was convinced that I was constantly cheating on him; finally, I was a *cunt*

because after he moved in with me and I bore witness to just how fiercely problematic his drinking truly was, I tried several times to break up with him and get him out of MY home.

Thankfully, with the help of therapy and my support network within Al-Anon, I finally wrested control of my life back from the alcoholic, but within a matter of months I found myself comfortably entwined with a new abuser.

My second abusive partner didn't drink at all, which seemed like a welcome respite from the prior trauma. However, rather than drink, his addiction was to control. He needed to be the center of attention and to dominate everyone in his periphery. Therefore, to maintain his dominion, it stood to reason that he was *never* to be criticized.

Initially, for someone like me, a person who felt out of control most of the time, the strong and domineering nature of this partner seemed like a nice change of pace: it felt good to finally have someone sober at the steering wheel. He even went so far as to basically tout himself as "an emotionally intelligent feminist seeking to create a polyamorous family with a live-in partner" on his dating profile. Further, consent was supposedly a priority.

Having previously endured the first wave of abuse and reflected upon it some, I felt more aware and emotionally mature than before, but ultimately, in truth, I was even *more* vulnerable and still struggled to set and maintain personal boundaries. Tenderness from recent wounds aside, I felt "safe" with this new partner, primarily because he was already in a committed relationship with someone else. By being on the outskirts of a committed married pair (a "satellite," I call it), I could kill three birds with one stone: first, I could give and receive the intimacy I wanted; I could maintain enough emotional space to continue healing; finally, I could explore other relationships in ways I hadn't done before.

As I quietly observed and generally participated in the relationship from a "safe" distance, I started to leave conversations and situations with the feeling that something wasn't right, and I just couldn't put my finger on it. When I brought it up to my partner, he found ways to subtly convince me that my observations were incorrect, so I started second-guessing everything.

I should have trusted my own intuition, because all along the married pair's relationship was, effectively, a paper house built on a beach at high tide: it was not engineered to last.

While this dystopia unfolded and the wife left the relationship, I realized the theatrics that I had just witnessed would be what lay before me if I became his primary partner. I already knew from the first abusive relationship that any begging, pleading or crying on my part would do jack shit; to encounter the same confusing feelings all over again enabled me to leave the relationship with only one question: why the fuck would I do it *again*?


So, one day, without warning (and that's the critical piece), I left.

In hindsight, perhaps what I expected to receive from these individuals was that they not only respect me and provide me attention, but that they also nurture within me an unconditional love that I should have generated for myself. At their behest, I relinquished much of myself and therefore thought it only fair to expect my needs met reciprocally.

However, I have since learned that expectations are premeditated resentments.

The unfolding of this story, *Harpagmos*, began approximately a month after the second relationship ended (Brizio, n.d.). I spent a considerable amount of time researching and desperately trying to make sense of my experiences. When I was spinning in the thick of rage, words to describe what I learned and felt were too honest for me to handle. Instead, for each manipulation tactic that I had experienced or learned about, I created an illustration. I layered on metaphors and let time pass and eventually I found the words to define my experiences.

The results of my work lie below.

— JRA 
2020-10-25

Introduction

Emotional Abuse is the accumulation of repeated patterns inflicted on a target that affects one's emotional well-being. However, because an emotionally abusive relationship's damage rests beneath the surface, the wounds left behind are impossible to see. In her book *The Emotionally Abused Woman: Overcoming Destructive Patterns and Reclaiming Yourself*, Beverly Engle exposes the injuries:

It [Emotional Abuse] is like brainwashing in that it systematically wears away at the victim's self-confidence, sense of self-worth, trust in their own perceptions, and self-concept. Whether it is done by constant berating and belittling, by intimidation, or under the guise of "guidance," "teaching" or "advice," the results are similar.

Eventually, the recipient of the abuse loses all sense of self and remnants of personal value (Engle, 1992, pg12).

Emotional Abusers are duplicitous and can present highly choreographed versions of themselves to the outside world, which enables them to hone their control over situations, circumstances, people, and, of course, the Victim.

Often, the abusers who inflict the damage are *themselves* afflicted by trauma, behavioral disorders or addictions, while some simply mimic behaviors learned over a lifetime. Whatever the reason, there remains no excuse for the Victim to tolerate conduct that is detrimental to their boundaries, self-respect or agency—irrespective of the abuser's status as partner, family member, friend et.al.

The sufferer must recognize that the abuser's "positive" behaviors are often executed for their own personal gain and therefore often strategically follow moments of conflict: in those moments, the Victim serves only as a hot commodity to the oppressor.

This codependent cycle of abuse sustains itself on the self-destructive habits of *both* parties: each “gets their fix,” as it were. Because of the abuser’s lack of emotional stability and security (both tangible and figurative), they exploit the Victim in order to maintain the facade that hides their inherent and multitudinous shortcomings. In doing so, the abuser sucks dry the Victim, who is still expected to provide a seemingly endless supply of affection and attention. In return for their sacrifice, the Victim gains a fleeting and hollow sense of self-worth from the abuser’s intense and sporadic adoration. Indeed, this dynamic exists in stark relief to the honest and unconditional affection and empathy that is found in emotionally healthy relationships.

Attempts by the Victim to enact change within a toxic relationship, from simply establishing boundaries to actually leaving the relationship, often incur severe and unyielding retribution from the abuser. This then compounds the Victim’s challenges, as they must now also bear the burden of choice: do they remain at the mercy of the abuser, or do they summon the strength to liberate themselves from the web of harm?

The Victim must make a decision that feels difficult at the least and impossible at the most, however they must carry on—with or without outside help. The uncertainty that looms over thoughts of actually removing oneself from an unsavory situation is often itself sufficient to cause many Victims to retreat back into the cold comfort of the relationship’s familiar and entrenched patterns.

Further complicating matters, emotional abuse is often swept under the rug, and not just by the abusers: many survivors with lived experience in toxic relationships endured both disbelief or downright dismissal of their trauma by the other people in their lives. From where does this presumptuous behavior originate? Perhaps this reaction from loved ones is a subconscious projection of their own denial; perhaps we as a society have normalized and become acclimated to many abusive behaviors already; perhaps that normalization has roots in the rigid social mores that tout the supposed safety and security of monogamy; perhaps the unearthing of an abusive relationship triggers negative reactions to the very gray scale of relationships overall.

Whatever the reason, even those with the best of intentions may still unwittingly aid in the Victim’s emotional manipulation, and through their influence the Victim is further gaslit.

Without being truly heard but instead have their own voices drowned out, Victims begin to believe the abuser's endless lies: that the Victim's own boundaries and rights are insignificant or altogether nonexistent; that their feelings and instincts are downright "wrong"; or, in the most offensive cases, Victims are told that "there are two sides to every story" and that they, the Victims, must show mercy to their abusers.

With or without the belief of others, it is *imperative* that Survivors of emotional abuse, along with the still-suffering Victims who exist in active states of abuse, learn to utilize whatever tools are available to them in order to regain control of their lives. Everyone possesses agency and the power to affect change within their own lives, but for those trapped within the confines of an emotionally abusive relationship, that power sits in a bell jar, tucked away with the abuser.

We the Victims must take back what is ours, for the person who knows what is best for us is, and always was, *ourselves*. Regardless of our histories and circumstances, awareness, but more importantly, *acceptance* of our respective situations is what allows us to choose the best course of action in the name of living an examined and honest life—FOR OURSELVES.

The two main tools on the abuser's belt are shame and isolation. Therefore, this collective aims to use opposing forces: through cultivating and presenting individual stories of abuse, survival and redemption to the world, we stand in public solidarity with all who have experienced and who still endure the trauma of emotional abuse.

This zine is divided into chapters reflective of individual experiences and are represented in the form most natural to their creators. In order to protect the contributors, all entries are anonymous. The desired outcome for all readers is to find support and understanding through stories of shared experience; in this way, the reader knows they are never alone, no matter how despairing the situation.



Chapter 1: **Definitions**

"You may choose to look the other way but you can never say
again that you did not know."

—William Wilberforce



RRA, 2020

Emotional Cannibals

You probably already know one. They don't quite feel human, yet they aren't completely alien. They walk among us in disguise—their true self revealed only for brief moments, but they do all they can to keep up the façade. The emptiness generated by their inability to experience true empathy and security causes them to have an insatiable appetite for warmth, love and admiration, and they must obtain these feelings from others—a process that always comes at a huge cost to the cannibal's target.

The toll on the target is often the forfeiture of personal freedom, thought, opinions and feelings. To the cannibal, any objection to their destructive behavior is deemed as “unwanted harsh criticism.” Any Victim will verify that to take any of the above back from the cannibal is to be met with the worst of fights, insults and manipulations. This is done to force surrender on the Victim.

For emotional cannibals, starvation is the key to their wastage. Don't feed, don't enable and don't allow the cannibal to feel at all human at your expense. Rather, identify what role you play in their show, how you prop them up and how you preserve their façade—then *cease those actions*. For example, I have learned to *first* evaluate my self-worth, and *then* determine how it is used in conjunction with others'.

To fully be released from the cannibal's grasp, the Victim must ignore its chatter, insults and false narratives and instead become a vocal part of the foreground. No longer able to feed, the cannibal will move on quickly and find a new source of sustenance: this is to be expected.

It's a hard truth, but everyone is replaceable. This is why it's important to know that you, the Victim, are not any different than the previous Victim(s). Regardless of the cannibal's bespoke theatrics toward you, you will inevitably be consumed like the rest. The next in line isn't any more special than you, either. Feel pity for the newcomer, for they don't know what lies ahead any more than you did. The emotional cannibal is a predictable animal.

The cannibals cannot love themselves, cannot self-reflect and cannot maintain healthy intimate relationships. Rather, interactions with emotional cannibals involve churlish power plays or the disintegration of the Victim's integrity for sport. Understanding my own deficiencies in healthy self-validation keeps me from being lured back by the fictitious hope that the cannibal could be anything other than what it truly is.



RRA, 2020

Narcissistic Supply

"Supply is any form of praise, admiration, emotional attention or physical resource the narcissist gets from the individuals they form relationships with or have interactions with,"

—Elinor Greenberg

How does this make them any different than me? I need all of the above, too! But don't get confused—the differences are many. For example, I don't sadistically manipulate others to get my needs met and my world doesn't come crashing down if I'm not the center of attention. Why? Because I have learned that everyone in life will have moments in the limelight, and that relationships are deepened when you can enjoy watching others shine. AND, when I accomplish something, a supportive partner praises me rather than put me down or throw tantrums because the attention isn't on them.

If I am the "supply," then I am objectified. In other words, I was never loved for who I am, only for my uses. I made my abusers feel human and was a servant made to make them comfortable and happy. The narcissist deems that they deserve this perpetual shower of admiration and attention, which means they need not do anything to earn it. Moreover, I could not convince them that any feelings I had were equally worthy of compassion and attention in comparison to theirs.

The narcissists *loved* me because they could dominate me. This way, they always had something to control, even if the world around them was in chaos. They *loved* me because they thought I was too submissive and codependent to want anything other than their affection or direction. I allowed my objectification to happen because what I thought constituted healthy attachment was seriously skewed. I wasn't far off in thinking the possessiveness that I encountered was a sign of their interest, HOWEVER, their jealousy did not equate to real love and their iteration of "care" toward me was akin to dull and cumbersome property maintenance. I DID NOT CONSENT to an unnegotiable, self serving, one-sided relationship.

Narcissists fanatically chase a fertile supply source that couldn't possibly exist and are loath to accept that conclusion. Because you can't fill an abyss by throwing stones into it, no person, reaction or experience will ever fully sate them.



RRA, 2020

Love-Bombing

Attention is amazing! Our brains are *literally* wired to respond to stimuli and repeated actions that reward us, like making a positive connection with someone. Obviously, we want to return for more happy, dopamine-fueled feelings, and when affection and attention are sincere, this cycle is considered healthy. However, when those attitudes are contrived, this makes the situation septic and is known as Love Bombing: it is “a lavish display of affection or concern directed towards a person one wishes to influence or impress” (*Love Bombing*, n.d.). This is false affection and works because clever abusers pinpoint your innermost desires and use them against you.

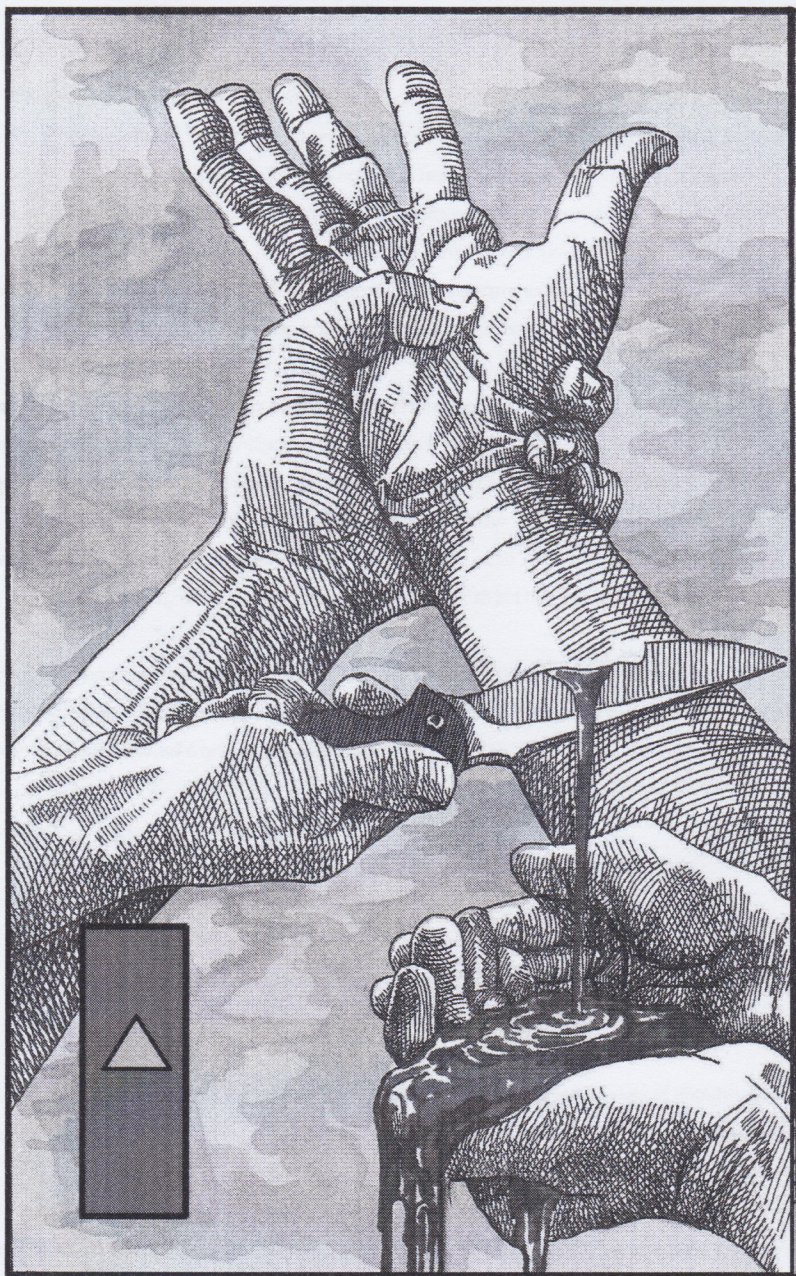
If a Victim has little to no self-worth, this enables the abuser to completely consume the Victim through Love-Bombing. For me, I spent many years struggling with self-confidence and acceptance of my outward appearance, so it was easy for my alcoholic abuser to instantly sweep me off my feet. He was in contact with me CONSTANTLY—I felt important, special and like a sexually-attractive prize. However, once I allowed him to live with me, his true self came out: the attention toward me subsided and his drinking and unpredictable behavior gave way.

The second abuser lavished me with attention just as the first; however, he appeared extremely vulnerable, emotionally intelligent and well-experienced with relationships. Lundy Bancroft, author of *Why Does He Do That?: Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men*, describes this type of abuser as “Mr. Sensitive”:

“This “gentle man” style of abuser tends to be highly self-centered and demanding of emotional catering. He may not be the man who has a fit because dinner is late but rather erupts because of some way his partner failed to sacrifice her own needs or interests to keep him content. He plays up how fragile he is to divert attention from the swath of destruction he leaves behind him” (Bancroft, 2003, 90-91).

This description fit my second abuser like a glove. At the time that we met, I was on guard for red flags I'd encountered before, so I did not expect to find an abuser that was hidden behind a “man” like this.

Be wary if you've been told that no other partner is as pretty as you, can fuck as well, can communicate as efficiently, and can make them feel as special. The red flag I finally accepted was his admission to me that he is “attracted to damaged women but doesn't know why.”



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Triangulation

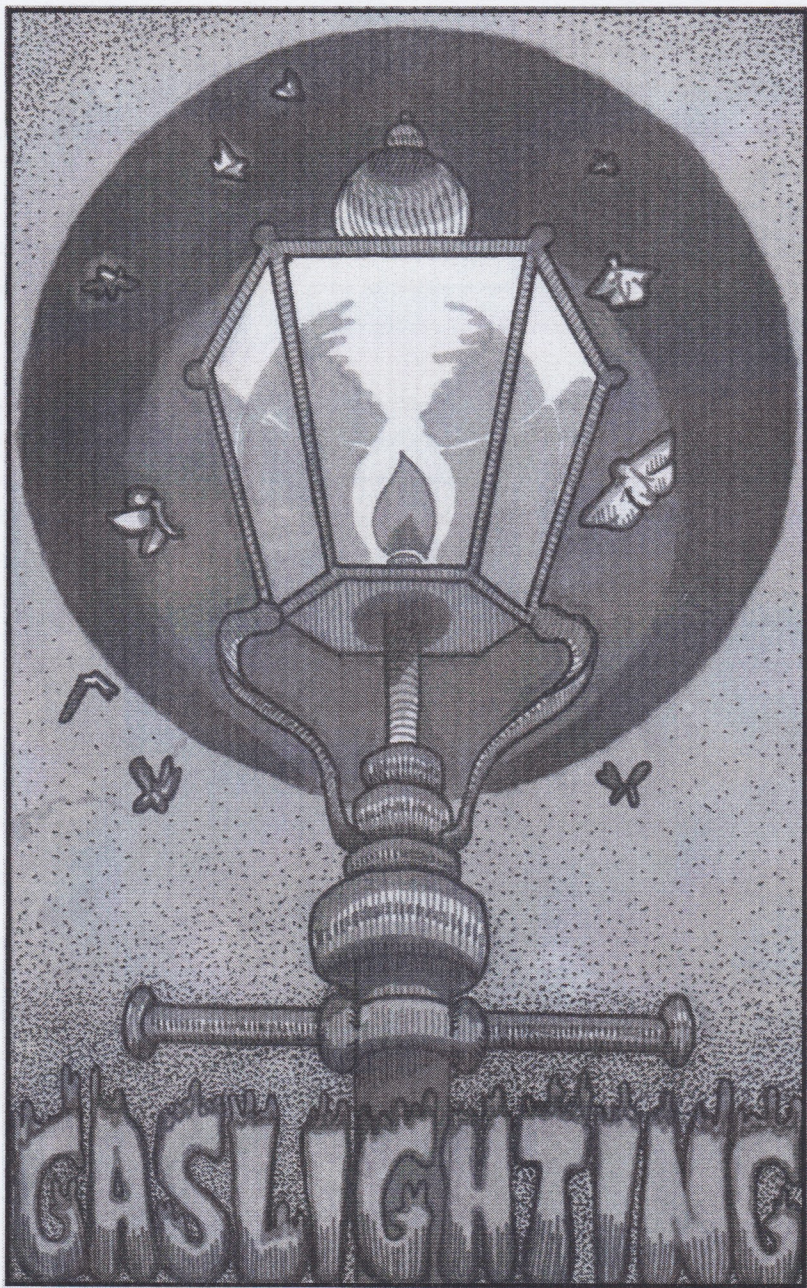
Triangulation is a very insidious and complex tactic. It is a dance in which the abuser seeks to maintain control of the narrative by causing strife between the target individual and a third party. This form of manipulation was used by my second abuser because he had multiple partners.

Triangulation resulted in increased supply for my abuser, however, when evidence of his misdeeds came to light, Triangulation provided the set-up that could make me (or any of his partners) the scapegoat for problems of his own making.

This abuser was adamant about honesty and openness in all of his relationships...except, those expectations didn't apply to him: he could be secretive about his dating and activities, though he once remarked, "If you want to know something, just ask." While on the surface this *appears* to invite open communication, what it *really* means is that all information on other partners/dates will be withheld until evidence that explicitly contradicts his word is presented. Upon discovery of such evidence, the abuser parrots phrases of misdirection like, "You must have forgotten I told you," which sow doubt and insecurity within the Victim (i.e. gaslighting).

This repetitious cycle damaged my self-worth and my loose understanding of healthy relationships, but to make matters worse, he strategically revealed the jealousies of his partners, including myself, to each other. This sleight-of-hand not only shapes *him* into the Victim, but it also diverts attention from *his* bad behavior. He believes that he is virtuous and faces unwarranted criticism and mistrust (i.e. stonewalling).

As I watched this scenario unfold with other partners outside of my triangle, I realized that the discomfort he extracted from us excited him (i.e. supply). This then bred within me envy and resentment for being disallowed the exploration of other types of relationships. Because, when we first began our relationship, I explicitly did not consent to exclusivity. After extensive journaling and painstakingly tracking of events on my own, I could physically see his pattern of abuse. This revelation was the catalyst for my exit: I saw this play out with previous partners including his wife, therefore I couldn't expect him to be any different with me.



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Gaslighting

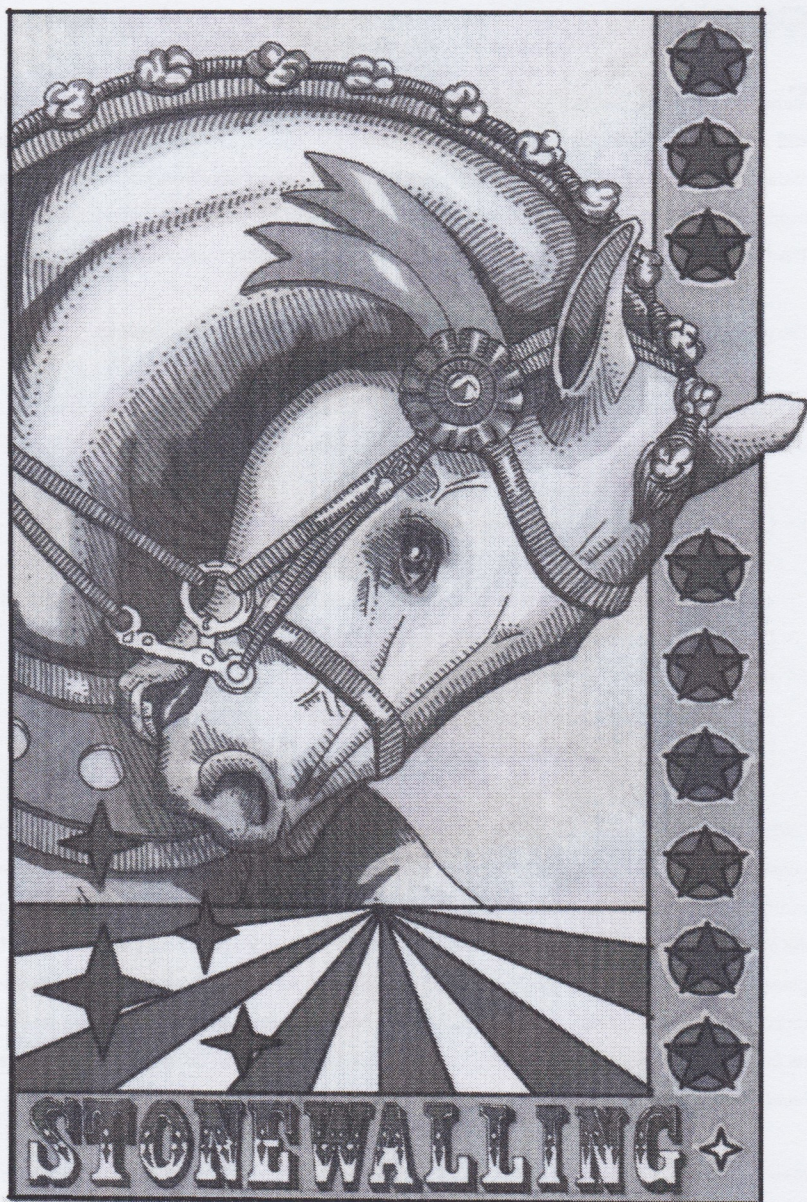
Emotional abusers disarm their Victims by nurturing instability and confusion. Without clarity and confidence, the Victim is more likely to need the abuser, this means that gaslighting manipulation causes the Victim to second-guess their *own* observations. However, when a person cannot trust their own cognitions, they rely on the seemingly most credible source: the abuser. Therefore, in this position, it's easy to see why victims stay in unhealthy relationships.

The psychologist Elinor Greenberg describes three common methods of gaslighting:

- **Hiding**: The abuser may hide things from the victim and cover up what they have done. Instead of feeling ashamed, the abuser may convince the victim to doubt their own beliefs about the situation and turn the blame on themselves.
- **Changing**: The abuser feels the need to change something about the victim. Whether it be the way the victim dresses or acts, they want the victim to mold into their fantasy. If the victim does not comply, the abuser may convince the victim that he or she is in fact not good enough.
- **Control**: The abuser may want to fully control and have power over the victim. In doing so, the abuser will try to seclude them from other friends and family so only they can influence the victim's thoughts and actions. The abuser gets pleasure from knowing the victim is being fully controlled by them (Greenberg, 2017)

I experienced my own iteration of the "hiding and control" behavior with my second abuser in a polyamorous triad. An everyday example: to make plans around multiple people is difficult, so we wanted to be upfront by holding open discussions to facilitate planning. It was very important for the abuser to know what his wife and I were doing, so we were very open about things like weekly plans or upcoming vacation, etc. However, when we asked for *him* to share, it was plain that he didn't want to show his hand. In retrospect, I see that this was a way in which he could dispute (and he frequently did) *any* of his unmasked bad behavior and ensure that he always had the upper hand on us.

Now that I understand this behavior, I can more easily see why I found it to be acceptable: I noticed that it often came from my own family! There were many circumstances when my own feelings and thoughts were diminished or noted as being altogether "incorrect," experiences which later led to difficulty in properly trusting my intuition, my abilities and my overall choices in life.



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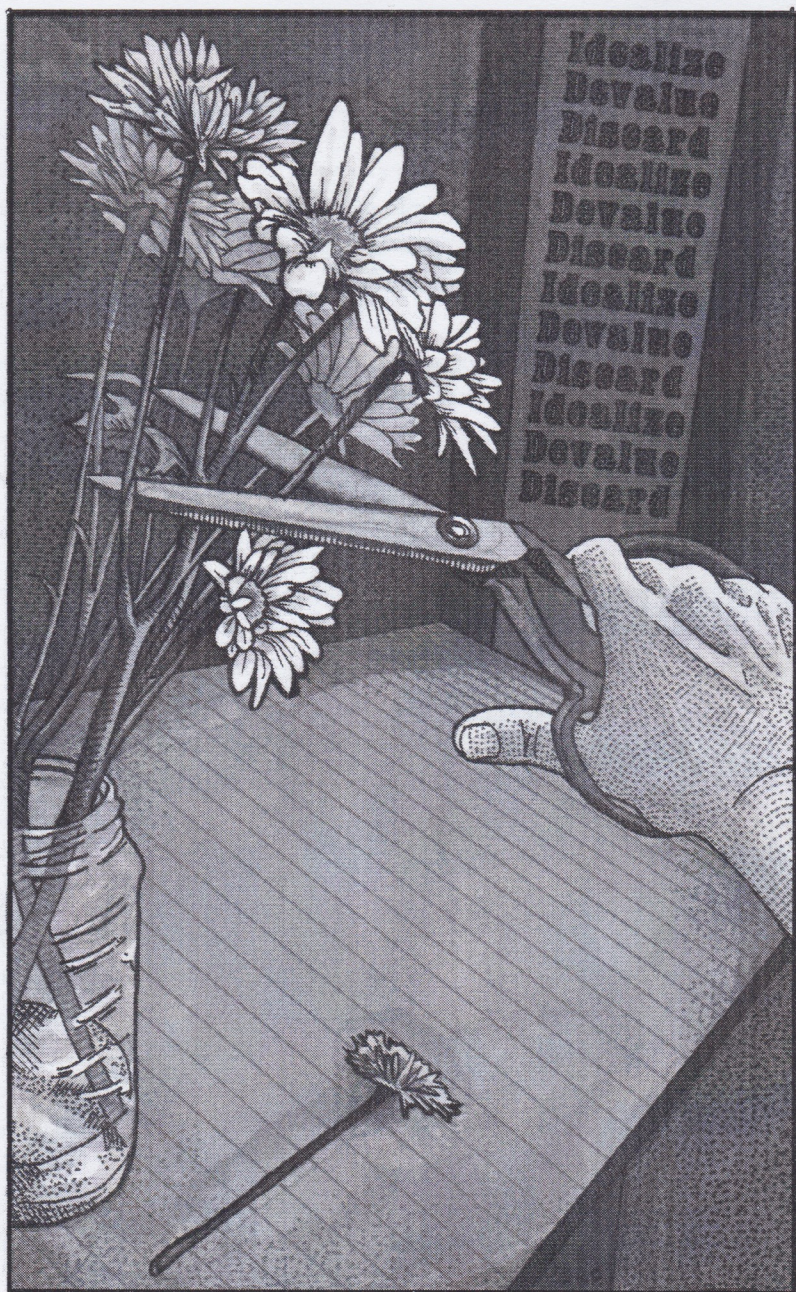
Stonewalling

In dressage, there is a disputed training technique called *Rollkur* in which a horse's rider forcefully keeps pressure on the reins, causing the bit to drive into the horse's mouth. To relieve its pain, the horse cranes its neck further and further inward so that its muzzle touches its chest. In prolonged training, the muscles of the neck change, the horse accepts its limited range of sight and its gait becomes exaggerated. The horse learns who's in control, sees only what it's allowed to see and accepts that its comfort is second to its performance in its master's circus.

As I have highlighted several times throughout *The Definitions*, Gaslighting frequently fed seamlessly into Stonewalling. Initially, the relationship with my "rescuer," the second abuser, started out honestly and openly. He encouraged me to share my feelings and promote healthy communication—even about hard topics. However, things began to change as I noticed that the relationship became wholly one-sided in ways in which I didn't consent.

Whenever my abuser needed consoling, I was there for him (a learned behavior to avoid and soothe conflict from my family of origin, I would put my own needs aside). When I finally felt like I needed my own needs addressed, especially concerning sex (because I like it), communication would shut down. Being in an ethically open relationship was determined at the start of the relationship, but I now saw that it was only permissible for him to seek out others: I could not. Any conversations concerning my desires to date more openly always circled back to a conversation that would benefit him and stall any progress that would benefit me. For example, he'd ask, "How can you date in a way that satisfies me?"

Every attempt at discussion, no matter how creative, insightful or gentle I was regarding his needs, always ended with distraction. If I became emotional or frustrated, I was told many things: that my behavior made him not want to meet my needs; that my concerns were criticisms of him as a whole; that it was *my* bad behavior that was ruinous to our dynamic and relationship. Once I felt safe to share my vulnerabilities, they were weaponized against me to shut me up and gain control of the narrative. He projected his behavioral problems onto me because it's was easier to stay the victim, while my feelings were not valid because of my previous relationship, my childhood problems, my codependency that caused me to be the problem... For every feeling I brought up and for every concern or question about his behavior, the conversation always turned on me. It was a dysfunctional merry-go-round and I was being groomed to accept control.



RRA, 2020

Idealize, Devalue, Discard Cycle

Both of my abusive relationships followed this set pattern. When I met them both, they made me feel so good, validated my experiences in life, and appeared to support my creative endeavors. I was sexy and appealing to them, and I craved that because again, I had no concept of how to internally validate myself.

Over time however, the pure bliss stage started oscillating concurrently with the purposefully created instability derived by the tactics noted previously. I either tolerated or wrote off behavior that I knew was wrong because I desperately wanted the feeling of intense bliss and connection to come back—and sometimes it did! But those experiences became fewer and farther in between. My abusers didn't give a shit about treating me better or changing their behavior because they knew that my actually leaving would be nearly impossible, as long as they occasionally gave me a few good times.

When they realized that I was a human and not just something to have for sex and entertainment, I was deemed "difficult" and discarded emotionally, but I was kept physically present for attention, comfort, money, a home, and/or sheer convenience. But behind the scenes, the search for new women (in some form) was constant.

Because I ended both relationships, the actual *Discard* part of the cycle for me was defined by my constant appeal for emotional connection that was instead met with deceit and lies.

In my first relationship, his underlying porn addiction became his sole form of intimacy, meaning that though I was generally neglected, I was still constantly told to be on the lookout for other men. His "concern," therefore, justified his breaking into my journal, email and phone.

For the second, I was secretly replaced by more women under the guise of "friendship." The bliss stage was simply not worth chasing because it wasn't coming back. After witnessing him and his wife melt down, I accepted that the same cycle would become my reality.

I felt so low after my first experience that it took a long time and a lot of work to finally free myself and turn my focus inward. On the second go-around, I couldn't forget how agonizing that recovery was and did not want to backtrack, so I took someone's suggestion to move forward and leave no loose ends. With new perspectives, I now had an easier time taking hard-line steps to not fuck around with this bullshit again.



RRA, 2020

False Narratives

"My horn would cry aloud even if I held my tongue."

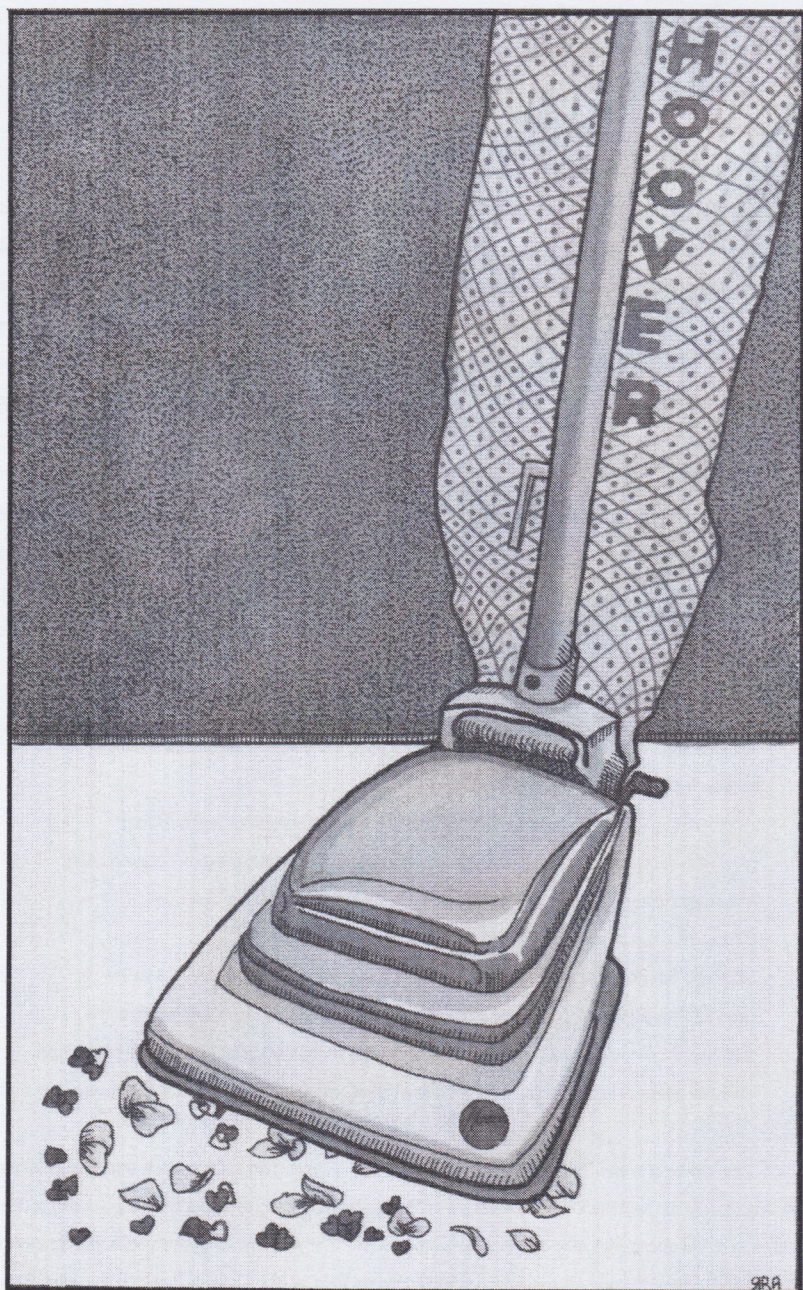
—Aesop, *The Goat and the Goatherd*

Everyone has their own narrative for which to account regarding the events and encounters of their lives. Even an event that two people have experienced simultaneously can be retold by each in vastly different ways due to a number of individual factors. Because of this, stories can also bend and twist depending on the teller's underlying motives and agendas. When a narrative becomes so far removed from a majority of the facts and is even modified on purpose, the intent is no longer to share a story as it happened but to distract from the truth and elicit emotions like disgust, anger and blame. This manipulation technique is known as a False Narrative.

Abusers can be fanatical and downright insane with the ways in which they manipulate their accounts to benefit themselves, even when the facts say otherwise. False narratives are exhausting. And that's the point! The most outrageous things said to me were meant to entice me to give up supply, even if it took the form of a screaming match. False narratives are stones thrown to wound and provoke. Here are a few common themes I've observed:

- False accusations of infidelity on the Victim's part that actually resemble what the abuser has done (projection).
- Accusations of being brainwashed by family, friends, therapists, and support groups to deflect the abuser's behavior when the Victim attempts to set boundaries.
- Labeling the departure of the relationship by the Victim as proof they are dysfunctional and have commitment problems.
- Labeling the departure by the Victim as proof they were the abusive one in the relationship, especially if the victim goes "no contact". Walking away responsibly from an abusive relationship without explanation should be considered self-protection and self-preservation because a Victim can't heal without that created safe space.

When you leave or make adjustments to the relationship, you may lose friends and family along the way due to the convincing false narratives the abuser is going to shout from the rooftops. The stories they tell about you may be so rational sounding that you will look like you're the irrational one (and you may second guess your own narrative). This is not a game that can be won in the traditional sense. Set the record straight with those that matter to you and keep the focus on yourself. The truth eventually comes out and speaks for itself.



RRA, 2020

Hoovering

The first abuser baited me with emails brimming with promises and benign small talk, desperately trying to draw me back into a cycle that took all my mental capital to escape. This is a shockingly common tactic:

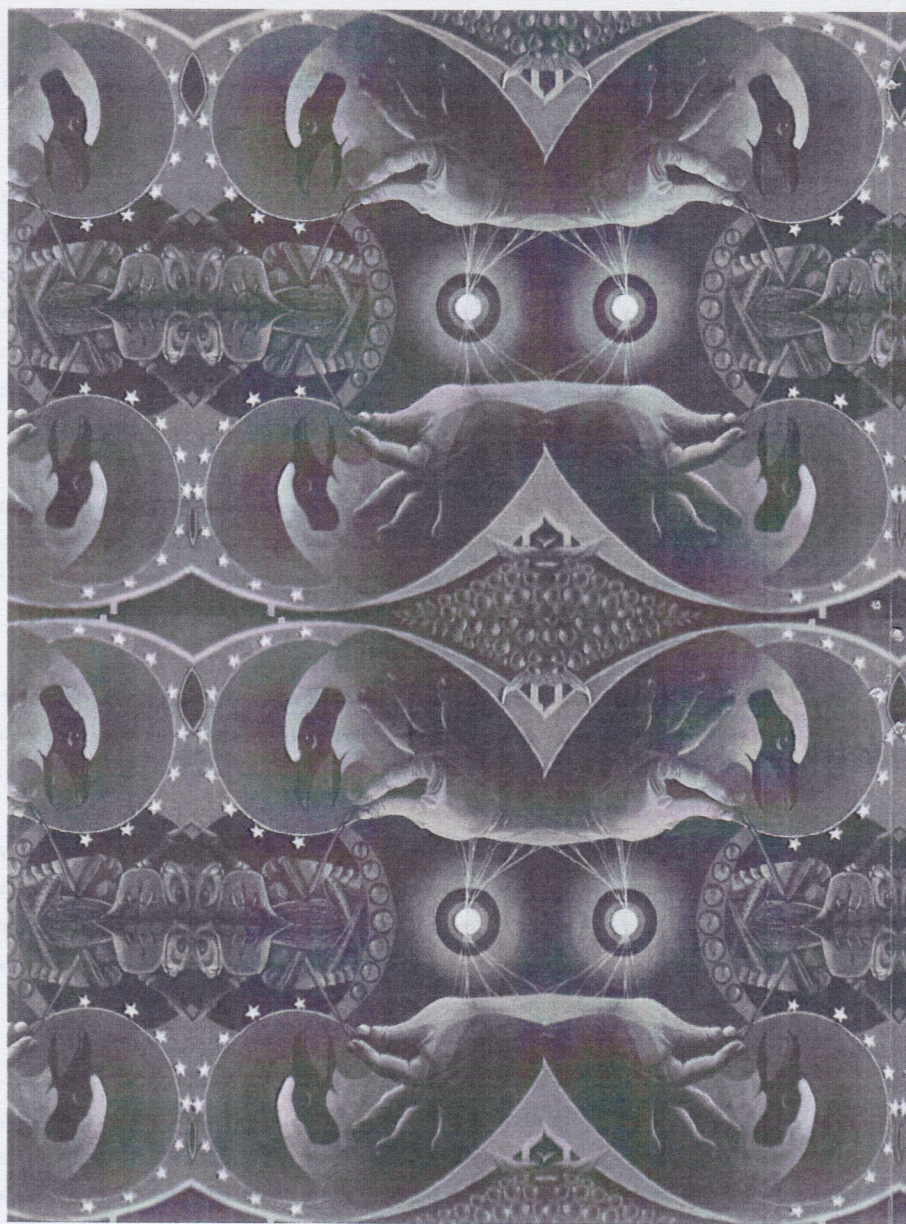
"A narcissist is likely to reach out to a former Victim, especially if the Victim left them first or if the Victim has moved forward with his or her life, in order to draw them back into the trauma of the relationship. This is what we call "Hoovering," named after the Hoover vacuum, to describe how a predator like this can "suck you" back into the abusive cycle all over again, often subjecting you to a discard even more horrific than the first. It's important for Victims to understand that hoovering is not about missing the victim, loving the victim or even showing remorse. Hoovering is all about the power dynamic between an abuser and his or her victim" (Arabi, 2016, 100).

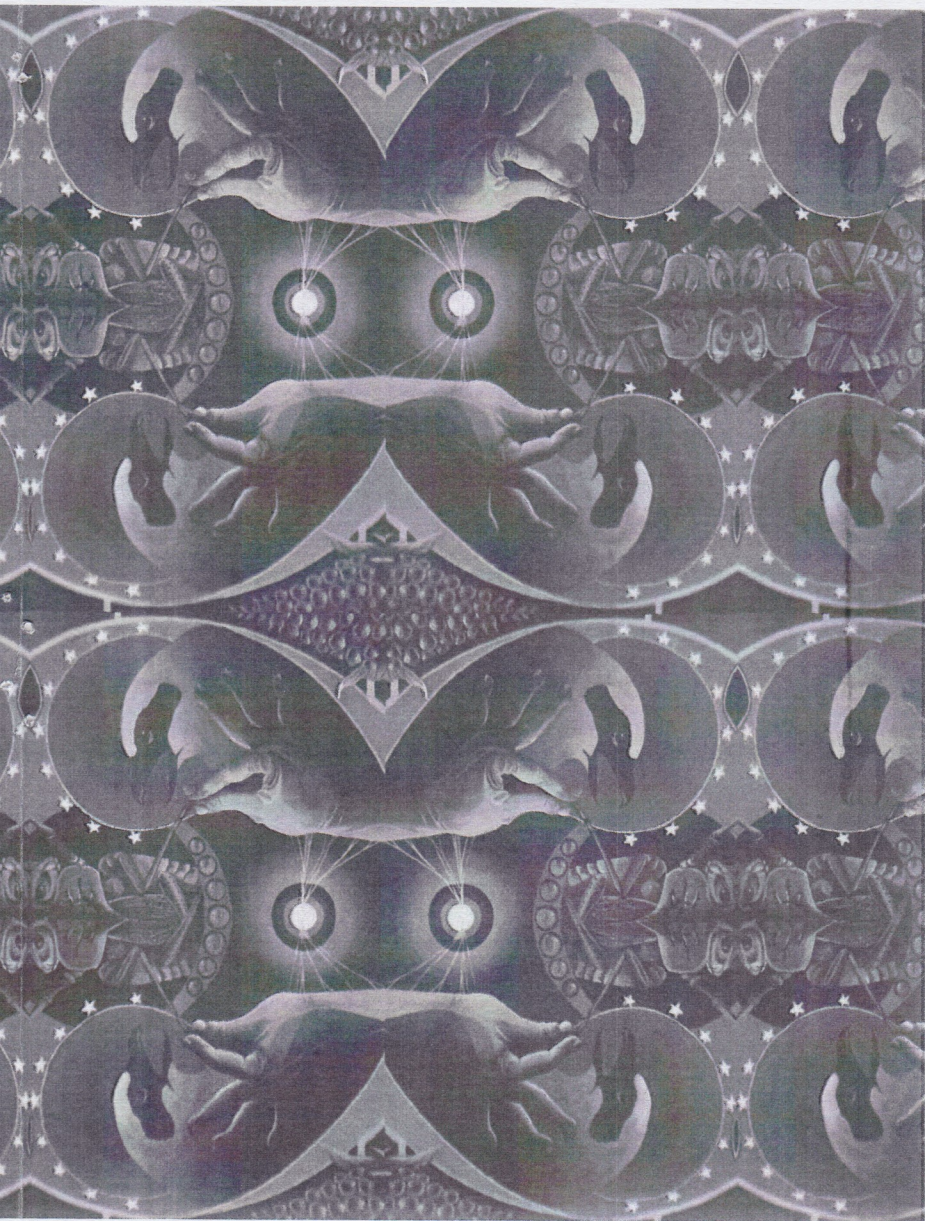
Acceptance that he would probably never change is what helped me to avoid this mistake again. But this took a while: the heart wants what it wants, and for me it was the hope that they would see the situation for what it was and we could get back together and ride off into the sunset. The drinking would stop; the excessive control would end.

There would never be a winning outcome and lessons would never be learned. But it's not my job to teach them and I can live without apologies or closure (even if they can't). My time is better spent focused on people in my life who genuinely care for me and respect my boundaries.

I've gone months without a word, then they suddenly return "How are you?" "How are your parents?" "I heard you went to see so-and-so..." "The other day I thought of you..." All of these things in themselves can be benign, but the driving motive beneath is where the truth is found if you re-engage. If the conversation takes a bitter twist with the old habits and arguments returning, clearly it's to keep the fight alive. Don't turn back—there is so much more out there.

A final word of unsolicited advice: if you've gotten to the point where you've determined that something is wrong in your relationship and the time has come to make your exit, do all of your planning and counseling in secret from your abuser. Never use your departure as an empty threat: that IS manipulation on your part and doing so minimizes the strength of your own boundaries. I know that leaving doesn't feel good at all in the moment, but things will get better.





RRA, 2017

Chapter 2: **Gaslight King**

"The narcissist has to condition his human environment to refrain from expressing criticism and disapproval of him, or of his actions and decisions. He has to teach people around him that any form of disagreement, however mild and minor, throws him into frightful fits of temper and rage attacks and turn him into a constantly cantankerous and irascible person."

—— Sam Vaknin

I have saved so many examples of Ex (for anonymity please) hounding my daily thoughts and haunting my dreams. I saved these memories immediately, or as soon as I had the chance to, as my way of holding onto my sanity. I saved these memories as reminders that I really am a decent person, I really am trying the best that I can, I really am making progress after the accident, and that maybe all of my doctors and family and friends are right and Ex was wrong.

When I was able to step back and look at the big picture, Ex was the only, single person who told me otherwise. That I was broken and hopeless. Ex was the only person telling me that I was doomed to failure, that I'm psychotic and should be put away, that I need to be reminded of the head trauma and how brain damaged I am, how I'll end up in a ditch without Ex and they're the only person who has ever supported me...

The verbal manipulation made me second guess everything I heard from people, including my doctors at first. It even made me wonder if I actually had hearing problems when I was accused of not understanding something Ex said and then Ex told me that the accident apparently made me deaf too.

I have two examples of this verbal manipulation. Each one year apart (this had been going on for some time).

The first is when I visited home to see family. I was also excited to see good friends of 20+ years. I had been asking for Ex's support to try snowboarding again since the previous season to see where I was at in physical recovery. Visiting my family towards the end of the following season gave me this chance when I was invited to explore a bunny hill on a beautiful, very snowy day.

The invitation came from one of those good friends, an accomplished snowboarder and instructor themselves who Ex and I had ridden with several times in the past. Ex introduced me to them when we met so many years ago. Being familiar with my abilities before the accident and aware of my recovery afterwards, I felt this friend was a safe person to be with. I went with them and their partner and had a great time relearning things, feeling the snow and the wind again, figuring out where I'm at in recovery to continue my return to a sport I adore.

The snow became a heavy blizzard later, we got a flat tire and almost got into an accident. We returned so late that I decided it was safer to crash on our friend's couch and get going in the morning.

Ex was furious about this decision. Ex told me that I should've kept driving even late at night during the blizzard and ice storm to go anywhere else other than our friend's place. Ex then accused me of cheating on them with our friend.

Because our friend's partner lives with them and they were present of course, Ex included them in the accusations of cheating as well. Ex then let me know how disappointed in me they were that I saw anyone other than my family in the first place because I was "supposed" to just be visiting family. I was not spoken to by Ex for the remaining week of my visit. Fast-forward to my return home. During my "talking to" I caught conflicting comments from them. Ex went from 1) "We talked about this before you left and you should've known better! You know that we planned on going when you got back!" ... I noted that I don't recall any of these discussions, began apologizing and said let's just go and try to have a nice time... to Ex then stating 2) "Well I was going to surprise you and we WERE going to go together when you got back but now you've ruined it! I'm never snowboarding with you EVER again!" ...exit me giving up, starting to cry and going to my office because I knew Ex would get even angrier if I cried around them. So did we talk about snowboarding or was it a surprise?...

The second verbal manipulation was when we were trying to discuss divorce terms. I stated that I would like very much to still be able to see our dog (going to Ex) at least once a month. Ex said that I would never be able to see the dog again because I had always been so irresponsible with it. I raised the dog at least 85% by myself after its rescue. I trained it, worked on its abuse issues, brought it to its vet and grooming appointments, established its records, etc. because Ex was often "too busy."

Ex stated during the divorce discussion that I was already hurting the dog by my "demanding" to talk to Ex at the dog's new dinner hour that Ex created (unknownst to me) and now the dog is missing its dinner and going hungry. Rewind: I spoke with Ex over the phone about 15 minutes after the hour that Ex pointed out. I chose a meeting place 5 minutes from Ex and dog's home. If the dog's dinner time was at the hour, I thought, then the dog would've missed its dinner before Ex and I even arranged our meeting. I noted this, reminded Ex that we're only a few minutes from their home and I suggested that I can wait so Ex can take care of the dog and return. Then we could continue our discussion without either of us feeling rushed and the dog would be ok.

Ex replied: "Fuck you! I'm not doing this back and forth bullshit!"...and it went downhill from there ending with Ex getting within inches of my face and starting to raise his voice with further obscenities. This is around the time in my life that I began waking up. I calmly stood my ground

and said I'm not putting up with this disrespectful, childish behavior and told Ex to let me know when they can talk to me like a human being. I then walked away with one last "Fuck you!" trailing behind me. Restaurant staff asked if I was ok. I said yes and requested my own table elsewhere to enjoy a delicious meal on my own.

Beyond the verbal abuse, I became increasingly concerned about my sanity when Ex was gaslighting me for several months toward the end of our marriage. Sometimes I'm sure I left a door unlocked or a window open or food on the counter or forgot to do this or fetch that. But it couldn't be more than one of those things every day, right? I mean, my cognitive therapist stated that I was progressing very well, improving every visit, and they were proud of how far I've come in recovery of memory length and recall of details. However, when Ex began telling me that I was doing these things more frequently because either I'm "so brain damaged that (I) don't even realize it" or I'm doing these things "on purpose just to piss (them) off," I began to lose hope in my progress.

At first I started questioning myself, double checking everything I did before leaving the house or going to bed for the night. Then I began triple checking everything. Every window, door, lock, climate control, the fridge, animal dishes, count the animals, garage, gates... It eventually took an additional 15 minutes for me to leave the house or go to bed after I had already prepared myself. Still, a window was left open or something not put away or a door left unlocked were still being brought to my attention at least once per day up to a handful of times daily.

My paranoia began to eat away at my sense of logic and just made me feel even more overwhelmed by everything. I decided that this had to stop and I couldn't rely on my memory anymore. My triple checking was such a time sink that I resorted to checking once and taking pictures of every window, lock, animal, etc. before leaving or going to sleep. The accusations from Ex continued but I was so exhausted that I didn't review the photos until the week after I began taking them. That's when I realised what was going on. My memory was ok. I reflected further on times when I did something wrong in the yard, whenever I asked Ex to see it to correct myself, I wondered why the cameras always "happened to be down at those times" and then I was accused of tampering with home security.

I began taking before and after photos every time Ex accused me of doing something I swore I didn't do. It only took a few days before I brought it up to Ex the next time they blamed me for something I hadn't done.

I noted that I have a picture showing otherwise, that I was responsible and I remembered correctly. Ex refused to see the photo or the data attached to it, became angry and told me that they "don't need to see my delusional bullshit" because they have "reality" on their side and all I have is "psychosis" from head trauma and I need to "get (my) shit together and get checked into a psych ward!" I took that advice with a grain of salt and I did get my shit together. Into several tidy boxes for moving out to a beautiful new home.



Chapter 3: **Unreliable Narrator**

"An abusive man is not a reliable source of information
about his partner,"

—— Lundy Bancroft, *Why Does He Do That?*

I used to joke that in my 30's, I became the type of person who cries in restaurants. Turns out, I cried in restaurants because my partner was emotionally abusing me. I can honestly say this is something I never thought I would write. I never thought the words "abuse survivor" would be ones that would be or could be a descriptor for me. I am a queer woman who is strong, independent, and successful. I was also someone who was in an emotionally abusive relationship with a man for almost 5 years.*

I wanted to write this because the reading of other people's experiences with emotional abuse helped me see he is an abuser and what he did to me was abuse. If it wasn't for those resources, the support of my family and friends, and access to quality mental health care, I would likely still be in the relationship with the abuse escalating. I am deeply thankful to have access to that level of support knowing those are most certainly privileges not all others can access.

The arc of my relationship with him reads like an "Emotional Abuse 101" manual. In the beginning, I was showered with compliments, praise, and talks about how special our connection was. Once I tried to name my concerns, enforce healthy boundaries, or just simply be me and no longer stay in the lines of the idealized person in his head, then the abuse started. The emotional abuse was so insidious, and he was so skilled in manipulation that for the longest, most painful time in my life, I truly thought that I might be the abuser in the relationship, and there was something so essentially wrong with me that I was truly a terrible person and had to keep trying to be a better partner; a better person.

It turns out nothing I did would ever make him stop saying terrible, awful things to me or stop him from trying to control and manipulate me. The level of control he tried to exert over me was in every aspect of our relationship—intimacy, finances, sex, relationships, jobs, living space, and children (current and future). Nothing I did, nor any part of who I am, was safe from him and his abuse.

**This doesn't just apply to heteronormative relationships, even though mine in this case was from all outside appearances one. I have had a similar experience in a queer relationship, as well.*

Even after leaving him and filing for divorce, he still tries to manipulate and control me through the divorce process and through sending angry rant-filled emails and messages that are utterly removed from reality to my friends. After the initial break up, he had the gall to reach out to my friends and family to try to control the message of our break up. My friends and family saw through this and reached out to me to ask how they could support me with him. The one thing that I have learned through this process is that the more the abuser feels control slipping through their hands, the harder they ramp up all their lies, manipulation, gaslighting, angry insults, and degrading comments. The abuser wants you to give in to what they want and conform to their narrative.

I find myself revisiting memories from our relationship that I once did not perceive as abuse, and I now have come to realize how abusive he was being in those memories. Even now, over a year removed from the relationship, I still find myself recalling events where I once thought I was the one to blame, only to have a deeply sickening feeling land in the pit of my stomach seeing them for what they were and are—painfully abusive. I am embarrassed that he was able to do this to me, that I was another of his victims. I still struggle with that, but I am coming to terms with it; working on healing from it. Here's an example of his abuse that still embarrasses me and infuriates me because I couldn't see how abusive it was at the moment.

The Abuser and the Soup Trope

We were having a relaxing weekend day at home and had decided to make chili together. Cooking together used to be our bonding activity, but it was only bonding if I deferred to him on how things were done. We disagreed on the types and amounts of spices that should go in the chili: he put a ton of paprika and oregano in what was to be the "chili," along with a scant amount of chili powder. I was worried that the lack of actual chili powder would basically make it a tomato soup, so I told him that I wanted to put more chili powder in to make it more like a chili. He disagreed and wouldn't let me put in any more.

He left the room to do something else, so I decided to add more chili powder. However, I slipped and made it too spicy. Upon realizing my mistake, I tried to add more tomato sauce to pull down the spice level. He came back into the kitchen he asked what I was doing with the chili, so I confessed that I had put in more chili powder but accidentally made it too spicy.

He tried the chili and said he wouldn't be able to eat it and that I had ruined it. I told him I could fix it or that I could make another batch of chili for him since I liked mine spicier anyway. He told me to forget about it. He didn't want chili now anyway.

I started to cry and apologized profusely. He yelled at me for being controlling and always having to have things my way and always having to be right. He walked out of the room angrily and I followed him, crying and apologizing and telling him that I could fix the chili and that I was so sorry for doing what I had done; I didn't mean to be controlling. He told me that I should stop trying to manipulate him by crying, and he walked away from me and told me to leave him alone.

Crying, I stayed where he left me. Eventually, I got up and made a separate batch of chili for him. When he came back to the kitchen to eat dinner, I offered him the new chili and apologized again for making the first chili too spicy. He then told me that he just wished I wasn't so controlling and angry and that I needed to look at why I acted like this. I took that to heart. I spent years turning myself inside-out to figure out why I was such an awful person who could treat my partner so terribly.

There are so, so many more of these instances that weigh on me. There are times when I am so angry at him for abusing me. There are times when I am so angry at myself for staying in that situation for so long. There are times, as the divorce process trudges along, when, even though I am no longer with him, I feel deeply sad and trapped because he uses the legal system to continue his abuse. There are times when I am immensely frustrated and sick of feeling terrible because of things he did to me and continues to do.

One of the most difficult parts for me to accept is that he will almost certainly emotionally abuse his future partners: he will continue to present himself as someone who had a difficult childhood and a rough adulthood; as someone who is aggrieved by me and other exes. He will continue to use psychological terms to present himself as someone who has "done the work," who is still doing the work, and who can help you work through your issues. He will lie, gaslight, and manipulate to convince the next person the exact same things of which he convinced me and the women before me—that we are somehow at fault for his abuse of us.

Still, as all of this weighs on me and I work to repair the damage he caused, on the days that I feel the worst, that I was able to make the choices that will eventually remove him completely from my life; that I can trust myself and my judgment; that I am a person worthy of love, worthy of loving others, and already has so much love in her life.

I know it's a struggle to see these things. On some days, it's still a struggle for me. I truly hope that if you find yourself in a similar position that this helps you to see that the person you are with is abusive and helps you find what you need to remove this person from your life. I hope you see that you are not alone in this experience, that you are beautiful, that you are strong and capable, and that you are an amazing human deserving of love despite what that person tells you.



Chapter 4:

Get Over It

"Abuse, if you slight it, will gradually die away; but if you show yourself irritated, you will be thought to have deserved it.

—Tacitus

Stories from my abusive past were something I mentally buried. Drugs were everywhere, so I never had a reason to bring them back to the surface. People always said, "Get over it," or, "Move on, it's all history now." When I was asked to write an article on emotional abuse, it took me a while to get out my pen and begin. Once I finally did, however, a flood of memories surfaced. I realized that the behaviors of my father, aunt, cousin, romantic partners, and even some of my friends were all abusive.

Abusive people all have something in common. They take the easy path; the wrong path. They use the same excuses for their actions: "I'm abusive because my parents were abusive," or, "I don't know any better." Just as the abusers use excuses, so do the abused. "It's ok, I can handle myself," they say, or "Everyone's got anger issues. I'll give this person another chance." The problem with this type of thinking is that those "it is what it is" answers are not the right answers, and that's something that needs to change. We should all stop supporting these repetitive patterns. We shouldn't still be thinking (and teaching) that hate is better than love.

That's why I'm so enthusiastic about this project. Having a space to share our stories and being able to speak about abuse in a non-judgmental format is a wonderful thing. It brings the realities of abuse to the attention of the public, which lets other victims know that they are not alone. People tend to hide abuse more than we realize, but now that it's being discussed more openly, we can take the necessary steps to stop the cycles.

When abuse takes hold of you, it scars you both mentally and physically. Perhaps the hardest part is being abused by someone you thought loved you, and that you loved too. It can make you think that hurting is normal, or that you're the flawed person. It can make you think that maybe you can eventually "fix" the abuser. It can become difficult to believe that there are better paths out there, because you were taught otherwise and were surrounded by negativity. Your self esteem plummets and you lose your sense of trust in others.

Getting out of an abusive relationship or situation is never easy. Emotional abuse still lingers, even after you have tried your best to move on. Recovering from it can take years, or even a lifetime. The first step is recognizing that you're not happy, that something is wrong, and that it needs to change. Truly believing in yourself and knowing that you both want and deserve better is a huge part of beginning your recovery.

I'm 38 years old. It took me this long to finally cut out every single bad person in my life. Even now, they still try to show up uninvited. Because it was my family, I was the one who felt guilty. I have realized that they're not attempting to change for the better, whereas I have been struggling for most of my life to change.

At 21, I went to support meetings for heroin addiction. During this time, I had to listen to vicious alcoholic family members (who sometimes blacked out and wouldn't remember shit the next day about how they had acted) try to tell me that what I was struggling with was much worse than their habits. Guess what? I found solace with an abusive boyfriend- and I relapsed for the next two years.

I quit heroin cold turkey, ended that relationship, and then was able to have one of my best friends be my roommate. My 20's were fun. I moved to the city. There was lots of drinking, and memorable nights with my girlfriends. This was a different chapter in my life, but most of my relationships with men would last about a year- and they were never healthy. I didn't trust any of them, due to legitimate reasons. They either drank too much, lied to me, flirted with others, still remained friendly with their exes, or outright cheated on me. I fell into another destructive pattern by keeping the wrong type of men around. I always thought it was me, so I would try to hold on to somebody until the relationships became so obviously toxic that they had to end.

I met the last guy whom I allowed to physically abuse me when I was 28 years old. He was younger, cute, had a good career, and seemed to have his shit together. My life felt stagnant, and I was ready for a change. I was sick of living in such an expensive city, and of being tempted by the drugs which were easily found on almost every corner. I was tired of watching both strangers and family be stressed and angry all of the time. They tried to move through their lives so quickly, and to look into the future so far. They got offended and said hateful things if I ever suggested they slow down and enjoy life. I couldn't fix myself; I was in a bad spot. So my boyfriend and I decided to move to Oregon the year I turned 30.

My boyfriend had an alcohol problem that I didn't realize the extent of until after we had moved. One night he blacked out and attacked me. I blamed the booze, not him. Not surprisingly, he did it again a few months later. He pinned me on the ground and choked me. I thought I was going to die. I was finally able to swing hard enough to punch him in the eye. Still blacked out, he called the cops...on me! That was his last drink and the last time he touched me, but the verbal and mental abuse from him, my family, and even his family were in full force.

I felt so stuck, like I had no one. My boyfriend lied to his family about what happened, telling them it was me who had all the problems. He kicked me out on the streets for literally no reason except that his sexist father didn't like me. I was the one who had taken his grown son to a different state, after all. To listen to his father, you would have thought I had kidnapped him or some shit.

I put my life on hold and dropped out of college because his family didn't like the fact that he couldn't get a decent job in Oregon, even with his degree in chemistry. So I let him go back to college while I worked a minimum wage job and paid the rent. I knew in my heart that none of this was right, but then again my family never seemed to think this was a big issue. My aunt said I was "fucking nuts" for moving, and my other aunt would drunkenly text me awful and mean things. My cousin would throw it in my face that I "could have been married with kids by now" if I "would just stop fighting." I had never wanted marriage or kids...but my cousin would still say bizarre things like "It must be nice to have the luxury of being able to swear whenever you want, unlike us who have kids." She even shamed me about my appearance, saying, "You should do something with your hair and wear different makeup...look at yourself!"

And then there's my dad, who would come to visit. I honestly started hating these times. I would put my whole heart into his vacation, planning every hour and every option, just so he wouldn't have to do anything. Instead of appreciating my efforts, he would create these imaginary problems and get insanely angry and abusive towards me. To watch this grown man still publicly yelling "FUCK YOU!!!" to his daughter because I had brought instant coffee instead of a coffee maker to a campsite was simply unbelievable. I would receive the same barrage of abuse from him because the sandwich I had brought for him wasn't the one he wanted that day, or because I refused to drive him to some crappy corporate fast food chain that I didn't have any interest in supporting. My boyfriend was fine with how my dad treated and spoke to me, my dad was fine with what my boyfriend had done to me, and even my dad's girlfriend of ten years kept her mouth shut to avoid conflict.

This asshole ex of mine and I broke up about four years ago. I came home on my lunch break one afternoon and discovered that all his shit was gone. He left a goodbye note, which I instantly burned. I felt so lost. I was in a state by myself where I knew nobody who could help me. It was just me and my dog Charlie whom I had rescued. I was in a neighborhood that wasn't the safest place for a single girl, and I struggled to make rent with minimum wage jobs. I had to give up my car and I couldn't even talk to my family without hearing them say I needed to give up and come back to the midwest. My dad was yelling at me, saying I wasn't making enough money, like it was all my fault. I was in tears on a weekly basis.

The next three years were the hardest times of my life, but being by myself helped me to understand what I needed and wanted. I started learning about meditation and yoga. I realized I was a great person and didn't deserve to be constantly put down or held back. I had better passions and habits than my whole family combined! I began to recognize triggers. For instance, I couldn't even answer a phone call from my family without my heart racing and my anxiety going through the roof. What would the argument be about this time? I knew I didn't want to be like them, so I started becoming choosy about what and who I accepted into my life. I realized that I needed to get rid of all of my toxic relationships and literally let go. Doing this opened new doors and provided more space in my life, so that I could look for something better to fill it. That's when I made the decision to completely cut off my family from my life.

In the past two years, my circle of friends has gotten smaller, but I'm the happiest I've ever been. I loved myself and really pinpointed what I deserved, and I made it happen on my own. I finally found a partner who was my friend first. He's an amazing dad to his daughter and he's always been there for me and my dog. Honestly, I was starting to believe that guys like this didn't exist, but they do!

I have learned that every living creature deserves to be happy and loved. Thinking nothing will change because "you're this way for a reason" is bullshit. Use what hurt you from your abusive situation and teach others how to overcome their problems. Let's stop overlooking abuse by turning the other cheek. We must continue to provide awareness about abuse. We can all recover from abuse—humans, animals, and nature, but not without help. Let's stick together. Let's continue to lift each other up: let's make abuse go extinct!

I thank you for the opportunity to share this. Thank you so much for reading!

Chapter 5:
I Fucked A Fat Chick:
The Ballad of Skinhead Keith

"I fucked a fat chick,"

—Skinhead Keith

Emotional Abuse is pervasive and my experiences are not unique.

I've had five long-term relationships and only one was free from pathological Emotional Abuse.

This is not a story about any of them.

"And now, the end is near / And so I face the final curtain..."

Just past midnight in the late November of 2010, I delivered a pizza to a house I'd never been.

The man who answered the door that evening looked like he stepped out of my dreams: a Camel Turkish Blend cigarette hung effortlessly from his lip; he was pierced and heavily tattooed; he had multiple dogs and I could even make out a drumset, guitars and a bookshelf featuring authors that I love like Kurt Vonnegut and Hunter S. Thompson.

(It was a very big doorway.)

((Also, the skunky-sweet potpourri of pot shamelessly wafted outside from the living room.))

I stammered my way through the transaction, but this man charmed with his easy manner and northern accent and spoke as if I were the only person in the universe.

We talked about tattoos, books and music, bonding over our love of an obscure goth-rock band from the late 80s/early 90s. Then, he asked:

"Where are you from? You don't sound like a Texan."

"Outside of Chicago. Neither do you—where are you from?"

"MILWAUKEE! Oh man, I miss PBR. You've seen *Wayne's World*, right?"

"YES! Party on, Wayne!"

"Party on, Garth!"

"Yikes, I need to get back—we're closed and I know the guys want to go home. See you around."

"Right on."

Maybe I went back to the store / maybe I reprinted his receipt / maybe I got his phone number from that / maybe I texted him / maybe he responded with interest / maybe we set a date to hang out and smoke a bowl / maybe I got all dolled up / maybe no sooner than I met his many dogs and guinea pig and sat on the couch we were having sex.

Maybe it was because he paid attention to me / maybe it's because he warmly whispered all of the right things / maybe it was the best sex I'd ever had (and I've had a lot of hetero sex and sucked a lot of cock because practice-makes-progress).

Maybe.

"Regrets, I've had a few / But then again, too few to mention..."

Olive Garden is forever associated with the following conversation that I had with my friend, Kim:

between bites of breadsticks

"So, who is this guy again? You said his dick is pierced?"

"His name is Keith, he lives over on Castle Road by the DQ, he's really into Kurt Von——"

"Wait—you said he has dogs, a ton of tattoos and mentioned that he was discharged from the Air Force?"

"Yes...?"

"DUDE——THAT'S SKINHEAD KEITH!"

"I'm sorry?"

"Nic's* best friend, Skinhead Keith! You know he's married, right? She's deployed."

"Wait, he's married? WHAT and he's a Skinhead? How did I not know?"

"Yes, it's okay—he's one of the good ones.** How did you not know?"

"I don't know how I didn't know, but it's not like he introduced himself as "Skinhead Keith," he just said regular "Keith.""

**Nic was a man with whom Kim was having an affair, too: we shared this. Nic was separated from his wife. He also had a fetish for fat women (Kim was strong and active but on the larger side of "normal") and got his rocks off by feeding his partners. Kim and I are also Eskimo sisters with a different man——(we thought we were players.))*

***Being a skinhead ≠ being a racist——educate yourself.*

Anyway, I think I blacked out for a second as some things hurtled to the fore:

((Boots and braces

...tracing the lines on his chest piece

"What's this one about?"

"It's for my old lady,"

"Is she around?"

"Nah...")))

"Yes, there were times, I'm sure you knew / When I bit off more than I could chew..."

I'm not proud of what happens now.

Skinhead Keith and I continued the affair.

We sang and played music together.

We trained his dogs and performed first aid on his German Shepherd when she tore off a dew-claw.

Before I woke up one, Keith walked across the highway to the 7-11 and brought back cigarettes, coffee, milk, a breakfast sandwich, muffins and those little sleeves of powdered donuts. Softly, he kissed me awake and cheekily said, "I made breakfast—I didn't know what you'd want so I got everything."

Prior to my time with Keith, I'd had two long-term relationships including an engagement, and this quaint gesture was kinder than any ever before.

That year, I spent Christmas, also my birthday, with Keith. Being hundreds of miles from our families in Chicago and Milwaukee, and with local friends spending their holidays with family, Skinhead Keith was my family that year.

We stopped at the Allsup's for beer and witnessed the Christmas miracle: hiding in the grease-filled gas station was a unicorn in beer form: a dusty 6-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon tallboys. (Never again did I find PBR in Abilene, and if you know me, you know that the rest of my time there was spent drowning in cheap beer, cigarettes and opioids.)

Keith and I, all fucks gone, drove around town drinking our tallboys, smoking cigarettes and laughing at the Christmas lights. Then we made a ham, watched *Wayne's World* and got absolutely wasted.

It's still one of my best Christmases, but when you factor in that my dad left on Christmas Eve, I grew up poor and it's also my birthday, it doesn't take much to make it into the winner's circle.

"I've loved, I've laughed and cried / I've had my fill, my share of losing..."

Kim, Nic, Keith and I met socially a few times; a clandestine cabal of lechers.

Meanwhile, the new-car smell of Skinhead Keith began to wear off. The house fell into disarray and he was smoking inside; the dogs had taken over. 40-oz bottles of Olde English and Steel Reserve littered the floors.

"Can I borrow a few bucks? You know I'll get it back to you."

You have a BMW in the driveway and a pension. Why am I lending you money?

"Keith, I go to college, I deliver pizza for a living and I live alone. You know I don't have any money. How about we split some smokes and I bring you some food from work?"

"...okay."

"I'm not helping you drink."

Things changed.

Our last night together was unplanned.

After midnight. Sobbing. "I need you...I need you to come here....only you can fix it..."

"Fine. But this is the last time."

I went to his house which, by now, was a disaster area, and Keith was absolutely wasted. I helped him throw up. I cared for him. I stroked his head. I put him to bed. I told him everything would be okay. I cleared some of the detritus. I left him some cigarettes for the next day.

*"For what is a man, what has he got? / If not himself, then he has naught
To say the things he truly feels / And not the words of one who kneels
The record shows I took the blows / And did it my way."*

Inside the dying Sears, Kim says:

"Dude, I don't know if I should say this."

"What? Now you have to tell me."

"It's about Skinhead Keith."

"What about him?"

"So, you know how Nic likes big girls?"

"Duh, he literally leaves food for you."

"Well, I guess Keith said something like, 'Oh, we have more in common now since I fucked a fat chick, too. I see why you like it,' Please, don't be up——"

"ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME? I'M NOT EVEN FAT ANYMORE!"

My heart drops to the floor as my body fills with white-hot rage.

After everything I'd done for him. After "how sexy" I was. After the dew claw. After the "transcendent" fellatio. After the donuts.

In what remains the strongest moment of my life, I picked up the phone and called Skinhead Keith.

"Hey, gorgeous,"

"You think I'm a fucking fat chick?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You told Nic that you fucked a fat chick."

"Oh come on——"

"NO. You can go fuck yourself. I don't need you, and I don't need this bullshit. I'm not fat and you're an asshole, and I hope your wife finds out about you and leaves you high and dry. Go fuck yourself, you piece of shit." I blocked his number and never spoke to him again.

I did not learn my lesson and instead repeated this cycle to various degrees of blame, addiction and dysfunction not once, but twice more.

If you're stuck in a loop, don't worry:

Practice makes progress.



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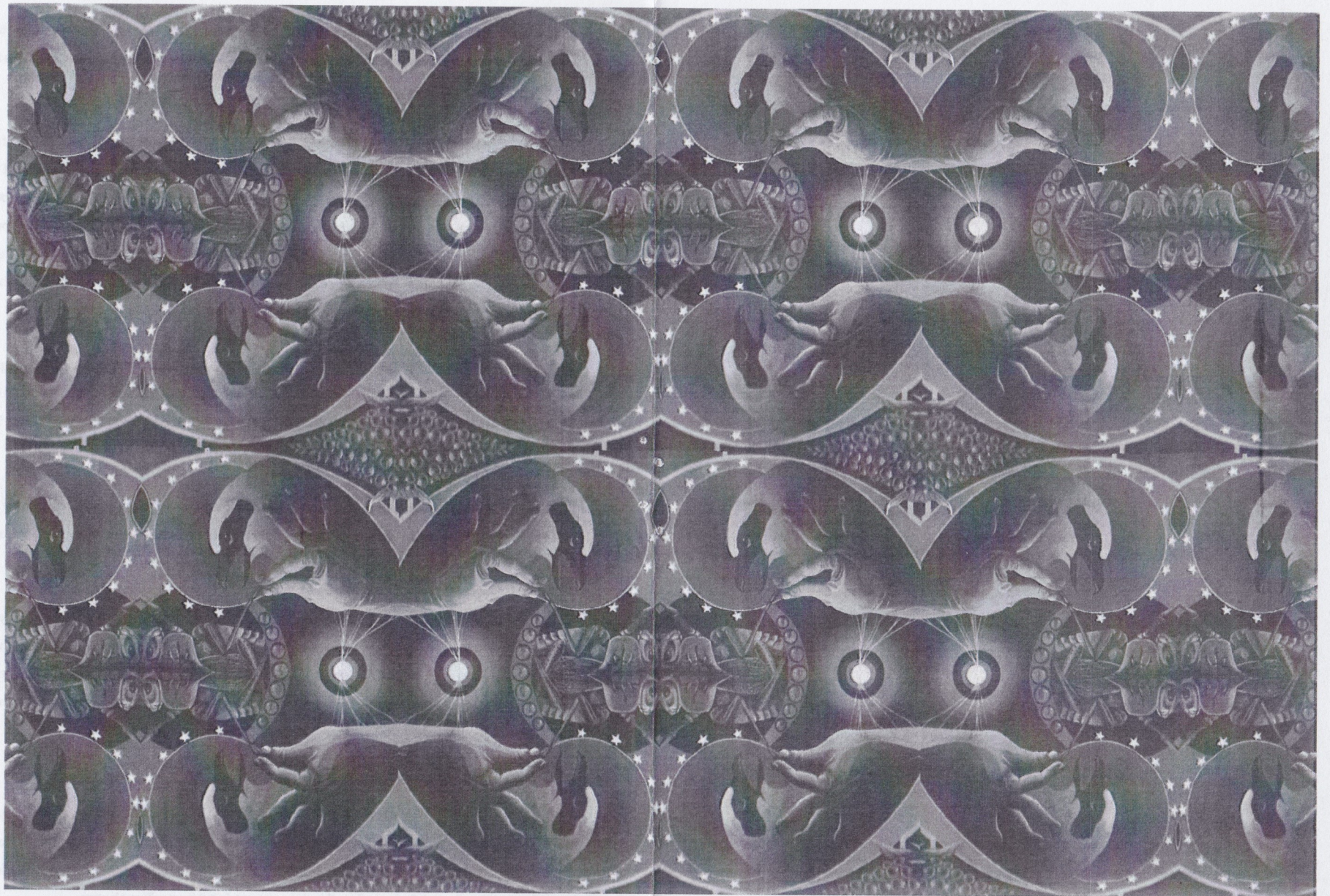
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